

SAARC Pak PM into the Cold

Nawaz Sharif has reasons to be happy after his three-day visit to Moscow. Syed Talat Hussain explains why

UPON his return from Moscow on a three-day visit, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif called it a breakthrough in Pakistan's relations with Russia. This claim appears to exaggerate on the side of optimism considering the vast array of divergences between the two countries.

But the Pakistani prime minister's usefulness flowed out of the fact that besides his productive meetings with the president and prime minister of Russia, the two countries were able to sign two agreements in the field of commerce and trade, laid down the framework for interaction among their respective private sectors, agreed to form a Joint Ministerial Commission with its offices in both countries to facilitate deeper co-operation, agreed to give each other the Most Favoured Nation (MNF) status and above all produced a joint statement at the end of the visit which spoke of new warmth in their bilateral relations, and mentioned various fields of joint co-operation besides aggressively calling for a "new multipolar world".

During his meeting with Mr Sharif, the Russian President Boris Yeltsin called for "burying the past". As of today we leave our past behind and take a new step in our relations," said the Russian president. These facts make an important point about the bilateral relations of the two countries — both want to narrow down these divergences and want to search a common ground to make a mutually beneficial promising new start. Part of this ground to build stronger ties can be found in the history of their interaction, which to a general reader, is nothing except a long catalogue animosity and hostility.

While Russia's relations with Pakistan have not been exemplary, these have had their inspiring moments. The most notable of these moments came mid-sixties at the height of Indo-Pakistan tensions. President Ayub Khan's 8-day visit yielded a remarkable change in Moscow's pro-India policy and after his visit, Moscow became visibly neutral in the Indo-Pakistan military engagements. It avoided taking sides calling upon both the countries to settle their differences through negotiations. This change also showed when the joint communiqué issued at the end of Indian prime minister's visit to Moscow did not contain any reference to the Kashmir dispute and the earlier Ran of Kutch skirmish.

The high point of Moscow's new approach towards Pakistan and India came when the former Soviet Union's prime minister Kosygin honestly brooked peace between the warring countries and his mediation led to the Tashkent Declaration which favoured Pakistan's position because it endorsed Kashmir to be an international dispute. Following developments were even more encouraging.

Moscow agreed to supply arms to Pakistan in 1968 which included Mig jets, IL-28 bombers, tanks and guns. The next year Russia financed the Sredniy Mills project and Soviet navy's Vice-Admiral spoke of Pakistan navy being a powerful pre-condition for peace in this part of the Indian Ocean Littoral. These positive developments were overshadowed by the later changes including warming of US-Chinese relations and corresponding erosion of trust between China and Soviet Union. But the point is that, though fewer, there have been occasions in Moscow-Islamabad interaction which show that the two have been able to forge mutually-beneficial ties and overcome their differences through constant diplomatic engagement. Even more relevant is to look at the present strategic and diplomatic imper-

atives pressing both Russia and Pakistan to move closer.

Moscow is in the process of recasting its Asia and Asia Pacific policy which has become intense in seeking stability in its relations with all major actors in the area. Moscow's relations with Tokyo have been registering a steady improvement, and even better its relations with China, besides Iran and India have obvious goodwill in Moscow, which is likely to increase in the coming years as trade and business and joint economic ventures bind them further together. Pakistan's importance is not lost on Moscow in this context. Pakistan is not just an important Islamic state and the second most important actor in South Asia. It is also a nuclear power. Moscow realises that in the coming years important global non-proliferation and disarmament talks might place it in positions closer to countries like Pakistan's than of the Western states.

Indeed recent talks between Russia and Pakistan on disarmament and non-proliferation issues has revealed many hitherto undiscovered commonalities in their stances. Also stable ties with Pakistan can mean more diplomatic good will for Russia and smoother interaction with the three regions Pakistan straddles: South Asia, South West Asia and the Gulf. Russia can tremendously gain in diplomatic stature and significance if it is able to ease Indo-Pakistan tensions and somehow broker peace in Afghanistan. But to do both it needs to reach out to Pakistan through solid bridges of friendship.

Moreover, Russia feels hemmed in as Nato planes pound Kosovo and it becomes increasingly clear that Washington will maintain a strong short to medium term presence in the region. Its European flank thus restrained and closely watched by Washington, Moscow's diplomatic thrust has to be towards Asia and Asia Pacific region, to enable it to have reliable "diplomatic depth" to counter growing US influence.

For Pakistan the strategic and diplomatic imperatives are smaller in scale, but are no less important. The most important and pressing issue for it is that of isolation on Afghanistan. Pakistan's Afghan policy makers over the past few months have come to grips with the fact that they need to break the emerging regional and global alliance against Islamabad on Afghanistan.

In the Six-Two Group on Afghanistan, Pakistan does stand alone. Mending fences with Russia could mean allaying many of Moscow's apprehensions on Afghanistan and Central Asia. It can also help Pakistan open additional important channels of communication with the concerned Central Asian capitals besides Teheran where Moscow's Afghan policy has a strong resonance. Co-ordinating efforts with Moscow for peace in Afghanistan can mean immediate easing of pressure on Pakistan on the Afghan front. Pakistan also sees Moscow being prone to treating it more seriously than it was before Islamabad became a nuclear power.

Signals from Moscow have been quite strong that the Russian leadership does not see its relations with India as a hurdle in developing its relations with Pakistan. "We can sell you arms," said the Indian prime minister, "but the point is that, though fewer, there have been occasions in Moscow-Islamabad interaction which show that the two have been able to forge mutually-beneficial ties and overcome their differences through constant diplomatic engagement. Even more relevant is to look at the present strategic and diplomatic imper-

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Polls Clear the Air A Plebiscite on the BJP?

In many ways, the Congress has been a gainer. Its main agenda was to pull down the BJP coalition, not necessarily form a government, says Praful Bidwai

SO India will have yet another election, which too may not produce a clear verdict. The cause for this—the BJP's failure to form a government—is a setback, especially for the Congress. But this may not be as bad as it looks. A balanced assessment of the past 13 months must be qualified by other factors. The BJP coalition, formed with 264 MPs, was always unstable.

Ms Jayalalitha did not suddenly become hostile to it. She was long a troublesome ally. It speaks poorly of his judgment and overdependence on Mr Amar Singh. Reports that he was in clandestine contact with Mr Fernandes have further damaged him. As has his more recent BJP-style "Rome raj" statements. Mr Yadav will pay heavily for this. He has weakened his own Rashtriya Loktantrik Morcha. He has forfeited the Left's goodwill. He could lose a good chunk of his U.P. Muslim support, as reports suggest.

The Congress could now make some inroads into its base in many of U.P.'s 54 constituencies where the Muslim vote is decisive. This would happen especially if it allies with the Bahujan Samaj Party. In many ways, the Congress has been a gainer. Its main agenda was to pull down the BJP coalition, not necessarily form a government. The fight, after all, was over who would form an interim government before elections.

The Congress's party-on-the-upswing image, burnished by its impressive performance in the state elections last November, will help limit some of the damage from the latest fiasco. The BJP now has three cards to play: "Rome raj", "we were unfairly toppled by a majority of one MP", and "we need more than 13 months to prove ourselves". Its ability to play them will decline, especially if elections are held closer to September than June.

Pre-election issues don't always translate into campaign issues. In 1997, the Congress used the Jain Commission to topple the UF government, but no one bothered about this issue in the elections. People judge a party less by how it was toppled than by how it performed. The BJP coalition's performance was abysmal—whether on law and order, the minorities, the economy, or security. Its record in U.P. and Maharashtra will also go against it. It would be a surprise if there is not a three to five per cent vote swing away from the BJP.

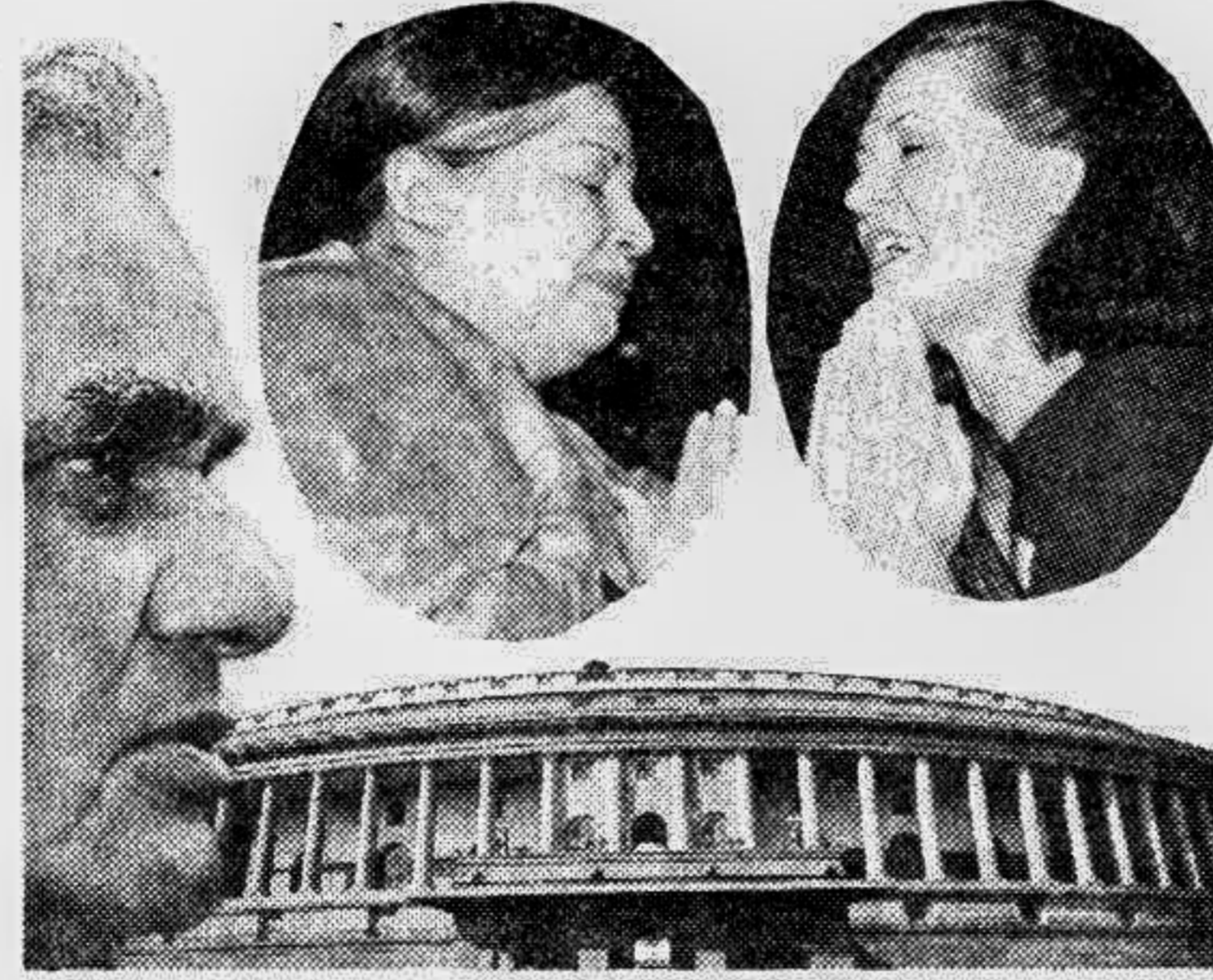
The Congress is likely to be the main beneficiary of this if it

builds the right tactical alliances. But it must give up the illusion that coalition politics is some kind of aberration or necessary evil, and that a two-party system is inevitable. It should know that some of the great trends in our politics have not changed: regionalisation, the "Forward March of the Backwards", Dalit self-assertion, and secularisation of Muslims. The Congress still cannot fully relate to these trends. The Third Front has emerged a big loser. Its erosion started three years ago when Mr Laloo Prasad Yadav left it. It accelerated with the loss of the Asom Gana Parishad, Telugu Desam and National Conference.

Now with its "centrist" component reduced to such formations as the six-MP Janata Dal and three-member TMC, it is largely reduced to the Left, with the RJD hovering close by. The loss is greater for the Left than for the regional parties. Today, it has become impossible for the Left to use a secular Third Front as the spearhead of a Centre-Left agenda. This could change if parties like the TDP, RJD and DMK perform better and again come together. But until then, the Left will have to rely on its own resources. Within the Left Front too, a rift has opened up for the first time, with the Revolutionary Socialist Party and Forward Block refusing to support the CPM-CPI. This chink needs serious attention.

Regrettably, the Left came close to nominating Mr Jyoti Basu to head a minority government to be backed by the Congress. It had rejected that move in 1996 in more favourable conditions. It makes no sense for the CPM to want to waste a trump card on a shaky, unstable government.

The Left must assert its own independent, unique, principles and priorities. Or it too could become a big loser—not in votes, but in credibility, its greatest asset.



Sonia's (Mis)calculation Ends

INDIA'S main opposition Congress party is looking for scapegoats after its leader was embarrassingly checkmated on the threshold of power.

Sonia Gandhi, who seemed all set to become prime minister of a minority Congress government when incumbent Atal Behari Vajpayee's government was voted out by the slenderest of margins in Parliament on April 17, is suddenly looking vulnerable and a relative novice in the no-holds barred game of Indian politics.

Political sources said knives were out in the party for some leaders who are alleged to have led the Italy-born Gandhi up the garden path by convincing her that the disparate opposition parties which had joined hands with the Congress to pull down the Vajpayee government were equally keen to support a minority Congress government from outside.

It was their miscalculation that prompted Gandhi to make the claim before President K.R. Narayanan when he asked her to explore the possibility of an alternative government, that she had the support of 272 members in the 543-member Lok Sabha, or Lower House of Parliament.

Gandhi had to report to

Narayanan at the end of the 48 hours he gave her to prove her claim that she could muster the support of only 233 members which virtually shut out the chances of her forming an alternative government. She managed to raise her tally to 239 when she called on the President again yesterday, but even that was far below the required number.

Political observers said the biggest mistake Gandhi made was in thinking that the other opposition parties would be driven by "altruistic motives" to instal a Congress government in power after they pulled down Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition government. She should have known that some of the major players had their own agenda and wanted to have a share of the cake of office. For instance, Samajwadi Party (SP) leader Mulayam Singh Yadav, whose refusal to support a Congress government sealed the party's hopes, could not have been expected to support Gandhi as the Congress was the SP's main rival in his Uttar Pradesh state.

"Why should Mulayam Singh Yadav support a Congress-led minority government when the party has left no

one in any doubt that its prime target in Uttar Pradesh is the SP?" asked columnist Saeed Naqvi, writing in *The Indian Express*.

Yadav may have changed his stance if the Congress leaders had discussed Uttar Pradesh with him. "Since the Congress managers did not engage Yadav in a dialogue, directly or indirectly, Sonia Gandhi was trapped. All that posturing, that elegant indifference to messy coalition, indeed to power, have all been dissipated in her very first emergence from cloistered politics. The Congress party managers, the authors of Sonia Gandhi as a project, will from now onwards have to live with the guilt of having wasted their trump card," he said. Congress sources said party leaders were angry with the "gang of four"—party spokesman and senior leader Arjun Singh, Makhani Lal Fotedar, R.D. Pradhan and Vincent George—and their ire would mount now that their worst fears, another election, has come true.

One of the main charges against Arjun Singh, who was said to be the brain behind the party's strategy, was that he did not consult other leaders. Singh was reported to have come under attack by some members of the party's policymaking work-

ing committee when they met Gandhi on Saturday.

Some parliamentarians from Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and the northeastern states also expressed unhappiness against him and charged him and a few others with having "surrounded and monopolised" Gandhi, according to sources. Communist Party of India (Marxist) leader Harkishan Singh Surjeet, who had campaigned for a Congress government, was angry with Gandhi for allegedly pushing the country to elections by her unwillingness to support a Third Front government, comprising non-Congress and non-BJP parties.

He angrily reacted to Gandhi's remark that the "personal interests" of some leaders were the main obstacle to the formation of an alternative government and said: "She can't claim to be defending national interest. In her meeting with the President, she made it clear that no other formation should be given a chance in the event of the Congress failing to muster enough support," he fumed.

— P. Jayaram

—India Abroad News Service

Neglected Sindh

M B Kalhoro writes on Islamabad's double-standard policy towards Sindh

THE verdict against Benazir Bhutto and her spouse Asif Zardari by the Ehtesab Bench of the Lahore High Court is a historic one as a former prime minister was declared disqualified from politics for five years. Ms Benazir Bhutto, a world famed politician, had time and again expressed her apprehensions over the judgment as one of the judges was the son of a member of the apex bench which had sentenced her father Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Her fears turned out to be true and she was convicted. This triggered off protests throughout the country but Sindh experienced stronger tremors than other zones. After her ouster from the top slot, the daughter of the East talked about Lahore and Larkana and the different kinds of treatment meted out to prime ministers from the two cities. In her press talk at the Naudero house after her dismissal, she had spoken of the assassination of Liaquat Ali Khan, the execution of Z.A. Bhutto, the first elected prime minister of Pakistan, the unceremonious departure of late Muhammad Khan Junejo and finally her own ouster. The core of her talk was that double standards were being observed as the prime ministers from Sindh and Punjab received different treatments.

However, it came as an utter surprise when federal information minister Mushahid Husain Syed, commenting on Ms Benazir Bhutto's reaction, said, "The judges of Switzerland were not Panjabis". No doubt, the former editor of the Muslim tried to neutralize the impression that Punjabi judges had given this judgment. The Ehtesab Bench had passed the order against Benazir Bhutto on charges of corruption which she still denies, said Senator Safdar Abbasi, adding that "actually,

the Swiss law was manipulated in Pakistan." He asked as to why out of 47 judges of the Lahore court, only these two were picked up to form the bench and why the right demand of Benazir to shift her cases to Sindh was rejected by the government?

Imran Khan, chief of Tahreek-Insaaf, during his recent visit to Larkana, described Mian Nawaz Sharif as a big defaulter. Benazir Bhutto, while talking to newsmen on April 3, had called for recovering loans from the defaulters instead of sending the army men to recover Wapda dues and had also termed Mian Sahib as a defaulter. In a recent speech, Dr Ghulam Hussain, an old friend of late Z.A. Bhutto and secretary general of PPP(SB), revealed that the list of defaulters was stopped from being presented in the national assembly only because it had carried the name of the prime minister on the top.

PPP leaders and workers say that it is a two-faced policy as Bibi is punished on unfounded charges and incomplete investigations while the big defaulter is spared. Mushahid Husain Syed, who had once been contributing to The Frontier Post, Peshawar, rightly pointed out to the twin-standard of Benazir Bhutto in Sindh and Punjab. But have the minister and the concerned authorities ever pondered over the vast difference between the outright dismissal of hundreds of contract doctors in Sindh and the regularisation of such doctors in the Punjab. Development work in the Punjab continues but the same is at almost a standstill in Sindh. Governor's rule is imposed in Sindh even though the crime rate in Punjab is very high. And no one can deny that out of 35 ministries and divisions at the

Centre 80 per cent posts are occupied by representatives from Punjab while 20 per cent functionaries are Urdu-speaking and there is no Sindh, Pashtoon and Balochi there. It is all right when a government functionary meets Dr Qadir Magi in Hyderabad to gain support on the Kalabagh dam issue but it is a sin for Ms Benazir Bhutto to talk to Ajmal Khattak and have a corner for the leadership of Pakistan Oppressed National Movement (PONAM). Should this approach be called diplomacy or double standard? One must be fair in his assessment.

The prime minister, before leaving for Russia, constituted a team of federal ministers to study the situation and to suggest measures to meet the expected developments in the wake of Ehtesab Bench's decision. The team members met the Sindh governor and stressed the need for the revival of the political process in the Sindh province where the Sindh Assembly's function had been limited. But how can it be possible to continue the governor's rule and renew the political process? A clash cannot be ruled out between the governor and the would-be chief adviser, having all the powers of a chief minister to exercise. Perhaps the main aim behind these manoeuvres is to crush the expected outbreak of protests by PPP and save the PML's position which is day by day declining. Ms Benazir Bhutto had rightly said that when the nation was united over the nuclear test, Nawaz Sharif, without taking the consent of the cabinet, had announced the construction of Kalabagh dam which had wiped the nation. Sindh, NWFP and Balochistan had targeted the Punjab. What was the need for raising such a controversial issue at that juncture? It was in

fact, a blunder and the government had to give up its stand quietly at a later stage.

The important question is what type of signal the rulers want to give to the nation, particularly to Sindh, with the disqualification of Benazir Bhutto? Would it be beneficial for the country to isolate the PPP, the only countrywide political party in Sindh amongst a host of nationalist groups in the province? Definitely not. If the PPP is pushed to the wall it may also raise slogans of nationalism. On the one hand the PPP is busy setting its house in order to launch a vigorous campaign to dethrone Nawaz Sharif. The movement, once launched, might take a serious turn in Sindh where a sense of deprivation already exists with the sacked employees of different departments and where the PML(N) is not properly organized.

The Larkanaites, hearing the verdict, opted for a general strike for two days. There were incidents of stopping Shahbaz Express at the outer signal of Shahnawaz Bhutto railway station and, later on, firing on it near Mahota village where the train driver Muhammad Ayoub was injured. The daily rallies in the month of Muharram, show the severity of people's anger. A big campaign may erupt against the government, which may harm the unity of the nation. It is not a matter of putting Ms Benazir Bhutto behind the bars but what is important is it may generate distrust and may lead to hatred amongst people of different provinces. She had already been in jail for five years, including six months of solitary confinement. So jail for her is not new.

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan

Saffron Setback

The political uncertainty in both India and Pakistan will make the implementation of Lahore Declaration difficult, argues Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

THE impromptu bus ride to Lahore by Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee, the former prime minister of India, had all the trappings of a state visit. Mr Nawaz Sharif, his Pakistani counterpart, received him to red carpet at Wagah border where the inaugural bus of newly-introduced Delhi-Lahore bus service made its historic crossing sharp at 4:10 pm on 20th February last. His important cabinet colleagues lined up to shake hand with Mr Vajpayee. The services chiefs in their ceremonial splendour were presented to the visiting VIP at the Governor's House where the latter was also accorded a civic reception. Later Mr Vajpayee was treated to a banquet at historic Lahore fort — an honour reserved only for the guest enjoying special relationship with Pakistan.

Mr Vajpayee's gesture in accepting Mr Sharif's invitation, it seemed, was fully reciprocated. The two prime ministers to each other did conjure up an image of cordiality, normalcy and hopes even as they reiterated only their off-repeated positions on the issue of bilateral relationship of the two countries.

To produce the tangible results of Vajpayee's dramatic visit — the Lahore Declaration, the joint statements and the memorandum of understanding (MoU) the officials of both sides literally burnt their midnight candle. The differences were many but it was to their credit that the three documents were released by the prime ministers in a joint press conference on 21 February hours before Vajpayee's departure.

The Lahore Declaration which ranks among the landmark documents on Indo-Pakistan relations covered the entire gamut of relationship between the two countries including Kashmir, nuclear issues and confidence-building measures (CBMs).

In the Lahore Declaration, India and Pakistan agreed to intensify efforts to resolve all issues relating to Kashmir, refrain from intervention and interference in each other's internal affairs, combat the menace of terrorism in all forms, take immediate steps to reduce the risk of accidental or unauthorised use of nuclear weapons and to discuss security concept and doctrines with a view to elaborating measures for confidence-building in nuclear and conventional fields.

The foreign ministers, as per the joint statement, will meet periodically to discuss all issues of mutual concerns, including nuclear-related issues. According to the MoU signed by the foreign secretaries, nuclear issues will be discussed, prior notification will be given on ballistic missile tests and 'engage in bilateral consultation on security, disarmament and non-proliferation issues within the context of negotiations on these issues in multilateral fora'.

The documents were indeed elaborate. What was however vital but not covered by any of these documents is the future of nuclear weapons themselves, now in possession of both the countries. Although the nuclear capability of both India and Pakistan was sufficiently proved by their tests last year, certain issues were still unclear with regard to the countries' future plan about that capability. Would they induct the nuclear weapons in their armed forces and deploy them for possible use in future? Both have stockpile of fissile materials. Would they turn them into nuclear device for further tests or future use? Would they establish a fullfledged nuclear regime as such?

Prior to Vajpayee's visit, it was earnestly hoped that, obviously, the quest for peace and amity has hardly been the incentive behind the whole initiative. The main factor that seems to be pushing the dialogue is the dire economic situation in both countries. The rosy prognosis about Lahore Declaration is already proving to be premature not only because it lacked local incentive but also because it continues to face stiff opposition from the extremist elements in both the countries. The political uncertainty in both India and Pakistan will make its implementation rather difficult. It is not impossible. By any reckoning it will be a long arduous journey before the Declaration takes some concrete shape.

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